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SUBJECT: MUNICIPAL COUNCIL ELECTION RESULTS SIMILAR TO
PARLIAMENTARY OUTCOME

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary

¶1. (C) Results in the municipal council elections, held concurrently with parliamentary elections November 25 and December 2, mirrored those of the parliamentary elections. Twenty-six candidates from three Islamic political societies were elected to the 40 available seats, 17 from Shia society Al Wifaq and nine from the two Sunni societies Al Asala (Salafi) and Al Minbar (Muslim Brotherhood). The remaining newly-elected members ran as independents. Al Wifaq will dominate two of the municipal councils, Manama and Northern, and have strong representation on the Central council. Independent members dominate the other two councils. Under current municipal legislation, the councils have little real authority and limited resources. Many candidates ran on the pledge to push the government to give them greater power to make improvements at the local level. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Elections for Bahrain's five municipal councils were held alongside parliamentary elections November 25 and December 2. There were a total of 170 candidates, including five women, competing for 40 seats (compared to over 300 candidates, 30 of whom were women, competing for 50 seats in the 2002 municipal elections). Fewer Sunni Islamists were elected in the municipal polls than in the parliament, and a greater number of independent candidates were elected. Of the 40 municipal seats, leading Shia opposition political society Al Wifaq took 17 seats, Al Asala (Salafi) won six, Al Minbar (Muslim Brotherhood) took three, and independent candidates won the remaining 14 seats. As in several of the parliamentary races, some of the Al Wifaq candidates received overwhelming support, with two candidates receiving 95% and 94% of the votes in their districts and three others receiving over 80% of votes cast. One Al Asala candidate received over 80% of the vote in his district.

¶3. (SBU) Two of the five municipal councils will be dominated by Al Wifaq, which has seven of nine seats on the Northern council and six of eight seats on the Manama council. The remaining four Al Wifaq members are on the nine-member Central Council, whose other members are split between Al Asala, Al Minbar, and an independent. The councils in Muharraq and the Southern Governorate are composed largely of independents. Muharraq's council has six independents and two members from Al Asala, and the six-member Southern council has five independents and one from Al Asala.

Women Candidates Struggled

¶4. (SBU) Only five women registered to run in the municipal elections this year, down from 30 in 2002. Four of the five ran in Muharraq and one ran in the Southern Governorate, but none were competitive in their respective races. Women in the municipal council elections have faced difficulties due to a widespread public perception that the work of a municipal council is not suitable for women.

Municipal Districts Modified

¶5. (SBU) In mid-September, Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa Bin Salman Al Khalifa issued an executive order changing the municipal council election districts. Previously there were 50 municipal councilors, ten for each governorate, but the PM's order brought the municipal district boundaries into line with the parliamentary districts, thus decreasing the number of municipal councilors to 40. There was mild resistance to this change in the run-up to the elections from individual council members and from Al Wifaq as they anticipated that their seats might disappear. Although Al Wifaq had boycotted the 2002 parliamentary elections, its members had run in the municipal council races, winning 22 of the 50 seats. Now, even after losing five seats due to the contraction of the municipal councils, Al Wifaq's representation of 17 of 40 members is very close to its previous percentage of representation.

Municipal Councils Prioritize, But Lack Power

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¶6. (SBU) Municipal councils are not empowered to make decisions on the range of issues councilors believe they should be. Less than two pages of the 10-page municipalities law of 2001 lists areas in which municipal councils have some oversight or influence. Only one of the law's 42 articles describes, through a 25-item list, specific council areas of authority. Of these 25 items, many have language such as "may propose" or "may submit an opinion" without authorizing the political or economic power to carry out the proposals. The council submits proposals to the Ministry of Municipalities, but there is no legal requirement that the ministry act on the proposals. The rest of the law discusses the formation of the councils, qualifications of municipal councilors, council administrative issues, and the structure in which the municipal councils work.

¶7. (SBU) Municipal councils are given authority in the law to monitor the implementation of projects related to lighting, water, and sewage, but personnel from the Ministry of Housing and Public Works receive their instructions from supervisors in the ministry. The municipal councils have no authority to task ministry employees. As a result of the councils' limited mandate, many candidates pledged during their campaigns to demand greater powers. Municipal councilors plan to fight for the authority to direct road work, water and sewage projects, housing projects, and street lighting. In addition, newly-elected municipal councilors speak publicly of environmental projects and development plans for their districts but lack the resources needed to bring them about. At present, the most visible evidence of the councils' authority and limited financial resources is the establishment of several community parks that usually include child play areas, walkways, and picnic areas.

Chairmen Elected

¶8. (SBU) Each of the five municipal councils elected a chair as they met in the weeks following the general election.

Although all of the chairmen are new to their positions, three were members of their municipal councils during the previous term. The chairmen are:

Manama Municipal Council: Majeed Milad (Al Wifaq) is an incumbent from the previous term. Prior to his election in 2002, he was a public school teacher. He holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Bahrain.

Northern Municipal Council: Yousif Al Bouri (Al Wifaq) previously worked for a marketing agency coordinating conference planning. According to his campaign resume, is currently taking courses toward a bachelor's degree in political science.

Muharraq Municipal Council: Mohammed Hamada (Independent) previously worked in the Customs and Ports directorate in the Office of the Boycott of Israel (which was closed over a year ago). He was also general director of the Bahraini Olympic Committee. He has a high school education.

Central Municipal Council: Abdulrahman Al Hassan (Al Minbar) is an incumbent from the previous term. He worked in the Ministry of Education prior to being elected to the municipal council in 2002. He received his bachelor's degree in Sharia' studies from Riyadh and has been a cleric since 1987.

Southern Municipal Council: Ali Al Muhannadi (Al Asala) is an incumbent from the previous term. He was an accountant for over 20 years before being elected to the municipal council in 2002. He received his master's degree in accounting and finance from Goa University.

Non-Bahrainis Eligible to Vote

¶9. (SBU) A legal provision allows non-Bahraini property owners to vote for municipal council candidates (but not for parliamentary candidates). According to election officials, there were approximately 5,000 eligible non-Bahraini voters, 99% of whom were GCC nationals. There are no statistics available on actual turnout among these voters.

Comment

¶10. (C) Although the proximity of the municipal councils to their constituents could be used to implement real and

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visible improvements at the local level, the law limits what can be done. Financial resources and decision-making remain at the ministry level. Now that the opposition is participating in the parliament, there may be attempts to amend the municipal council law to grant the councils more local authority and resources.

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